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ABSTRACT

This glossary gives brief, non-technical explanations of the following kinds of terms: (1) names of all important languages now spoken in the Middle East, or known to have been spoken in the area; (2) names of language families represented in the area; (3) descriptive terms used with reference to the writing systems of the area; (4) names of famous inscriptions or sources of documentation for ancient languages; and (5) a few relevant technical terms of general linguistics. (Author/RM)

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CHARLES A. FERGUSON

GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATING TO **LANGUAGES OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THIS glossary was originally prepared for use in a survey course on the Middle East given at Harvard University in 1957. It has also been used in connection with linguistics courses at the University of Michigan (1960) and Princeton University (1961). It is here reprinted with minor changes and corrections.

Charles A. Ferguson

January 1962

GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATING TO LANGUAGES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

THIS GLOSSARY gives brief, non-technical explanations of the following kinds of terms:

(1) Names of all important languages now spoken in the Middle East, or known to have been spoken in the area;

(2) Names of language families represented in the area;

(3) Descriptive terms used with reference to the writing systems of the area;

(4) Names of famous inscriptions or sources of documentation for ancient languages;

(5) A few relevant technical terms of general linguistics.

AFRO-ASIATIC Another name for Hamito-Semitic (q.v.) recently devised to emphasize the fact that the non-Semitic languages of the stock, formerly often called the Hamitic languages, do not seem to form a distinct unity.

AHIRAM One of the most famous Phoenician inscriptions, carved in the sarcophagus of King Ahiram uncovered at Byblos (modern Jubayl, Lebanon) in 1923. It dates from about 1000 B.C. and its discovery demonstrated that the Phoenician alphabet was in use as far back as the eleventh century B.C. and that it definitely served as the prototype of the Greek alphabet from which the modern alphabets of Europe are derived. Later discoveries have pushed the age of the alphabet back still further.

AKKADIAN The Semitic language spoken by the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians. It was written in cuneiform (q.v.) script, most often on clay tablets, and an enormous number of such tablets on a great variety of subjects are extant. The language is documented over a long time span and a large area. The southern dialect, especially as represented in the early texts of the Babylonian Empire, is called Babylonian, and the northern dialect, especially as shown in late Assyrian texts, is called Assyrian.

ALPHABET A system of writing in which each symbol tends to represent one phoneme (q.v.) of the language being written. A writing system in which the consonant phonemes are regularly indicated while the vowels are shown, if at all, only by additional diacritical marks, is usually called an alphabet also, although it could with some justification be regarded as a syllabary (q.v.). The most important alphabets in use in the Middle East now are the Arabic (used for Arabic and Persian), Hebrew (for Hebrew), Roman (for Turkish), and Armenian (for Armenian).

AMHARIC The most important Ethiopic (q.v.) language now spoken. It is the official language of Ethiopia and is spoken by several millions of people in that country. It is written with the Ethiopic alphabet, which goes from left to right, and in which the letters are unconnected and the vowels must be indicated.

ARABIC The most important Semitic language now spoken. It is the official language of all the Arab countries and is spoken by some fifty million people. Classical Arabic was the language of the Qur'an and the vehicle of the great Arabic literature. It is still universally acknowledged to be the standard form of the language and is used for written and formal spoken purposes. For ordinary conversation, however, the local dialects such as Egyptian Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, etc. are used. Arabic is regularly written in a distinctive alphabet which goes from right to left and is very cursive; most of the letters are connected, many letters are differentiated by various diacritics such as dots above or below them, and the vowel signs are usually omitted.

ARAMAIC The name given to various Semitic dialects of the same general type as Syriac (q.v.) once spoken over a large area of the Middle East. One variety was probably the language of Christ. A modern variety is still spoken by several thousand people in Ma'lula and two neighboring villages in the Anti-Lebanon north of Damascus. Earlier, Aramaic was most often written in a script similar to that of modern Hebrew, but the modern Aramaic is not written.

ARMENIAN An Indo-European language which seems to constitute an independent branch of the family. It is spoken in Soviet Armenia and by several millions of Armenians scattered widely throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. There is an older Classical Armenian which was the vehicle of a substantial literature and is still the liturgical language of the Gregorian (i.e. Armenian) church. The modern language exists in a variety of dialects clustering around two standard literary languages, Eastern and Western Armenian. It is written in its own distinctive Armenian alphabet.

ASIANIC This name is sometimes used as a convenient cover-term for the various languages of ancient Asia Minor, the relationship of which is not clear, such as Elamite, Hurrian, etc. It does not imply that the languages included are related to one another.

ASSYRIAN See AKKADIAN

AVESTAN One of the two Old Iranian languages represented by extant texts. It is the language of the Avesta, the holy book of the Zoroastrians. The date of composition of the Avesta and the faithfulness of its transmission are complex questions; the language, especially in the older section, the Gathas, is remarkably like Sanskrit.

AZERI or AZERBAYJANI The Turkic language of Azerbayjan. It shows greater similarity to the language of Turkey than to the Turkic languages of Central Asia, but is sufficiently different to be regarded as a separate language. It is not often used for written purposes in Iranian Azerbayjan, where Persian would normally be used in writing, but when it is, it is usually written in the Arabic alphabet. In Soviet Azerbayjan it is widely used as a written language and a modified form of the Cyrillic (q.v.) alphabet is used.

BABYLONIAN See AKKADIAN

BERBER A closely related family of languages spoken by six or seven million people in North Africa. The Berber languages constitute one of the divisions of the Hamito-Semitic (q.v.) stock. Although some varieties of Berber have been written in the past, the Tuareg still preserve their old writing system, and some people occasionally write Berber in Arabic script, these languages are not usually written today, Arabic being used for this purpose in Berber-speaking areas.

BEHISTUN or BISUTUN The most famous Achaemenian inscription, carved on the face of a cliff on the north side of the main road between Kermanshah and Hamadan in Iran. The inscription, which is a lengthy recital of the accomplishments of King Darius, is in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian. By ingenious guesswork based on what was known about Persian history and language from other sources, it was possible to decipher the Old Persian and this in turn served as the first important key to the decipherment of Akkadian, and ultimately all cuneiform scripts.

BOGAZKÖY The most important source of Hittite texts, the royal archives of Hattusas, capital of the Hittite empire, excavated in 1906. Up to the discovery of these texts nothing was known of this important language, and very little of the history of the Hittites themselves. The name Bogazköy is that of the small Turkish village near the excavation; it is located about 150 miles east of Ankara.

CAUCASIC A group of over thirty languages spoken in the Caucasus, which probably constitutes a family. Two subgroups, South Caucasic (including Georgian) and Northwest Caucasic (including Circassian) are clear genetic units; the other languages are lumped together as Northeast Caucasic. These languages in general are characterized by rich consonant systems and complex morphologies Most are unwritten, but several are written in modified versions of the Cyrillic (q.v.) alphabet and the most important, Georgian, is written in its own alphabet.

COPTIC The most recent form of the Egyptian (q.v.) language; as a spoken language it died out probably in the eighteenth century. It was written in a modified form of the Greek alphabet, served for some centuries as the literary and liturgical language of the Egyptian Christians and remains the liturgical language of the Coptic church today.

CUNEIFORM A descriptive term applied to certain ancient Middle Eastern writing systems characterized by wedge-shaped marks, most often made by a stylus on clay but also cut in stone. First used by the Sumerians as a method of writing, it was adopted (modified to suit the particular language) for Akkadian, Old Persian, Hittite, Ugaritic, and other languages. Cuneiform scripts vary in nature from complicated mixed ideographic-phonetic systems (e.g. Akkadian with hundreds of signs) to syllabaries or quasi-alphabetic systems (e.g. Old Persian with thirty-six syllabic characters and five ideograms).

CUSHITIC A family of languages spoken by some millions of people in the eastern "horn" of Africa, including most of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland, and parts of neighboring countries. They constitute one of the divisions of the Hamito-Semitic (q.v.) stock. None of them are regularly written. The best known are Somali and Galla.

CYRILLIC The alphabet used for Russian and several other Slavic languages and, in modified form, for various non-Slavic languages spoken in the U.S.S.R. The name is derived from St. Cyril who is believed to have invented it in the ninth century A.D.

DEAD SEA SCROLLS A number of scrolls in Hebrew, both biblical and non-biblical, discovered in caves near the Dead Sea in the spring of 1947 and in several subsequent years. The biblical texts are roughly a thousand years older than the earliest manuscripts previously available, and the non-biblical texts offer a wealth of hitherto unknown material.

DIACRITIC A mark regarded as added to a letter and not part of the main body of the character, such as the accent over é, the hook under ŗ.

EGYPTIAN The language of ancient Egypt, documented from the fourth millenium B.C. It was first written in a complicated hieroglyphic (q.v.) system which was followed by other more cursive but not much simpler writing systems. Old, Middle, New Egyptian with Coptic (q.v.) represent a language documented for a longer period of time than any other language of the world. Egyptian constitutes one division of the Hamito-Semitic (q.v.) stock.

ELAMITE The language spoken in ancient times in Elam, a mountainous area of southern Iran. It is known from a few inscriptions of the third millenium B.C. and from some inscriptions and numerous tablets from later periods, especially of the time of the Achaemenian Empire, of which it was one of the official languages. The later material is in a cuneiform script derived from the Akkadian system. Elamite has not been shown to be related to any other language.

ETHIOPIC A group of closely related languages constituting one branch of the Semitic (q.v.) family. It includes the extinct Geez or Ethiopic proper, which was the vehicle of a fair-sized relico-historical literature and remains the liturgical language of the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia; Amharic (q.v.); and a half dozen other languages spoken in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Both Geez and Amharic are written in the Ethiopic alphabet, of which the letters are unconnected, run from left to right, and in which the vowels must be indicated.

FAMILY Two languages are said to be related, or genetically related, or members of the same family, if it can be demonstrated that they are continuations of a single language at an earlier point in time. Thus French and Spanish are related because they are both continuations of Latin, i.e. Latin went on being spoken in both regions and gradual differentiations without a break in communication between generations finally resulted in varieties of Latin so different that they are to be regarded as separate languages. The term family is flexible, however, as this process is a continuous one. It could be applied, for example, to the Hamito-Semitic languages, to Semitic languages, or Ethiopic. When necessary, terms like stock, family, branch, or sub-branch, etc., are used to indicate the time depth at which the presumed split took place. In this way one can speak of the Hamito-Semitic stock or super-family, the Semitic family, and the Ethiopic branch.

GEEZ See ETHIOPIC

GEORGIAN See CAUCASIC

HAMITO-SEMITIC or AFRO-ASIATIC A language stock consisting of five families of languages: Semitic (q.v.), Egyptian (q.v.), Berber (q.v.), Cushitic (q.v.), and Chado-Hamitic, a family of some thirty languages of West Africa including Hausa. Common characteristics found in all these families, though not necessarily in every language, and which may be assumed to have been present in the supposed parent language include: a special set of throat consonants (glottal stop, pharyngal spirants, velar spirants), the triconsonantal root (q.v.), a feminine affix t, a tense made with prefixes indicating the subject, certain kinds of derivative verbs, a set of pronominal suffixes.

HEBREW The Semitic language spoken by the ancient Israelites and in which most of the Old Testament was composed. It died out as a spoken language some time about the beginning of the Christian era, but was revived in the nineteenth century as the language of Zionism and is now the official language of the state of Israel. For many centuries it has been written in a distinctive script (derived from the Aramaic alphabet) called the Hebrew alphabet, which consists of unconnected letters (consonantal), running from right to left with the vowel marks usually omitted.

HIEROGLYPHIC A descriptive term applied to any conventional writing system of which most of the symbols are pictures of objects, such as the Egyptian, Hittite, and Mayan hieroglyphs. Usually such writing systems have a large number of symbols which are used in a mixed way, partly ideographic, partly phonetic.

HITTITE The chief language of the ancient Hittite Empire. It is related to Indo-European (q.v.) languages and was written in a special cuneiform syllabary (qq.v.). An important language of the ancient Middle East, it was completely unknown to modern scholarship until revealed by excavations at the beginning of the twentieth century. Another related language customarily written in a hieroglyphic writing system is called by the clumsy name of Hieroglyphic Hittite; this is not the same language.

HURRIAN A language known to have been widely spoken in northern Mesopotamia and Syria in the third and second millenia B.C. The language itself is known from relatively few texts widely scattered in time and place, the most important of which is the long letter from King Tushratta of the Mitanni country to Amenophis III of Egypt about 1400 B.C. It has not been shown that Hurrian is related to any other language.

INDO-EUROPEAN A very widespread family of languages which includes the Germanic (English, German, etc.), Slavic (Russian, Polish, etc.), Italic (Latin, the Romance languages), and about a half dozen other branches. Common characteristics found in all branches, though not necessarily in all languages, and which may be assumed to have been present in the supposed parent language include: a verb system which has different stems (for tenses or participles) characterized by certain vowel relationships (e.g. sing sang) or by suffixed d or t; irregular verb "to be"; gender inflection in nouns and pronouns, not in finite verb forms. The two branches of this family found in the Middle East are Armenian and Iranian (qq.v.).

IRANIAN A sub-branch of Indo-European languages comprising about fifteen modern languages as well as a number of languages now extinct. With the Indic sub-branch (Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, etc.) it constitutes the Iranian or Aryan branch of Indo-European. The most important Iranian languages now spoken are Persian, Pashto, Kurdish, Baluchi and Ossetic. The better known ancient languages include Old Persian and Avestan (qq.v.) of the Old Iranian stage and Pahlavi (Middle Persian) and Sogdian of the Middle Iranian state. Features characteristic of Modern Iranian languages, but not necessarily to be assumed for the proto-Iranian or proto-Aryan, include the presence of palatal affricates (ch of church and j of judge); relatively simple noun inflections; frequent use of compound verbs consisting of a pre-verb of some kind plus a colorless verb like "do," "be," etc.

KUFIC An archaic style of Arabic writing characterized by angular shapes and few diacritics. Formerly used in inscriptions and in manuscripts of the Qur'an, it is now used as an ornamental type face. Cf. NASKHI.

KURDISH A language, or more exactly a group of dialects of the Iranian sub-branch of Indo-European (q.v.). It is spoken by several million Kurds, mostly in Eastern Turkey, Southwestern Iran, and Northern Iraq, but also some in Syria, the U.S.S.R., and elsewhere. It is usually not written (Arabic, Persian, or Turkish being used for this purpose by Kurdish speakers) but when it is, the script most often used in the Arabic alphabet, although Roman and Cyrillic alphabets have also been used to a limited extent.

LINGUA FRANCA A language widely used in a given area as the medium of communication between speakers of different languages. It may be one of the languages of the area, as when Aramaic was a lingua franca in the Middle East, or it may be a language from outside the area, as English is in India today. The expression itself originally referred to a language used in this way around the Mediterranean for several centuries, based chiefly on dialects of southern France and northern Italy.

MOABITE STONE A tablet found in 1869 containing one of the most famous West Semitic inscriptions, a proclamation of King Mesha of Moab dating from the ninth century B.C. The language is very close to Hebrew and it is written in the Phoenician alphabet. At the time of its discovery this inscription represented the oldest known example of alphabetic writing.

NASKHI The style of Arabic script ordinarily employed in printed texts in modern Arabic. It is more cursive than Kufic (q.v.).

ORHON The most famous Old Turkish inscription, so called from the name of the river in Mongolia near which the two stelae were found. They are epitaphs, written in the so-called Turkish runes, dating from 734-5 A.D. and provided with Chinese translations.

PAHLAVI or PEHLEVI Name applied in general to western Middle Iranian and in particular to the official language of the Sassanians. The script, derived from the Aramaic alphabet, is often difficult to interpret. Other varieties of the language are known from Zoroastrian and Manichean texts discovered in eastern Turkestan at the beginning of this century.

PAMIR languages. A group of five Iranian languages or dialect clusters now spoken in and near the Pamir mountains, chiefly in Afghanistan, but also in the U.S.S.R. and Pakistan. The total number of speakers cannot exceed 50,000 and the languages are being replaced by Persian.

PASHTO The Iranian language spoken by the Afghans or Pathans, who constitute about one-third of the population of Afghanistan, and several millions of people in Pakistan. Since 1936 it has in theory been the official language of Afghanistan but Persian remains the most important language of the country. Persian and Pashto are both Iranian languages, but actually they are quite different, Pashto phonology and morphology being much more complicated than those of Persian. It is written in the Perso-Arabic alphabet with a number of additional letters to represent consonants not present in Arabic or Persian.

PERSIAN The most important Iranian (q.v.) language now spoken. It is the major spoken language in slightly different forms in Iran, Afghanistan, and Soviet Tajikistan, and is known and used in Pakistan and elsewhere as a literary language. It is written in the Arabic alphabet with several additional letters, except in Tajikistan where the "Tajik" form of it is written in a modified Cyrillic (q.v.) alphabet.

PERSIAN, OLD One of the two Old Iranian languages represented by extant texts. It was the language of the Achaemeni and is known from their royal inscriptions. It was written in a cuneiform syllabary (qq.v.).

PHOENICIAN The Semitic language spoken by the Phoenicians. It is known chiefly from numerous inscriptions, mostly rather short, of the cities of Tyre, Sidon, etc., and their colonies or trading centers around the Mediterranean, especially that of Carthage, the Phoenician of which is usually called Punic. These are in the twenty-two letter Phoenician alphabet, from which the Greek alphabet was derived. The language itself was quite close to Hebrew.

PHONEME One of the basic sounds of a given language which may be used to differentiate words in the language and in terms of which the native speaker hears and speaks. For example, the b p t e and a sounds of English bet, bat, pet, pat are phonemes in English, and English speakers readily hear and make them. Arabic has no p phoneme but has two s phonemes, and the speaker of Arabic has trouble hearing the difference or producing it between b and p, just as the speaker of English has a hard time hearing the difference or producing it between the two Arabic s phonemes.

RAS SHAMRA A cape on the coast of northern Syria, the site of the archeological excavations of the ancient city of Ugarit which began in 1928 and yielded extensive texts in Ugaritic (q.v.), a previously unknown Semitic language spoken there in the middle of the second millenium B.C.

ROMAN or LATIN The name of the alphabet used originally for Latin, and later in various forms for most of the languages of Europe. The only Middle Eastern language for which the Roman alphabet is regularly used now is Turkish, but Roman alphabets have from time to time been devised for various other languages of the area.

ROOT Term used for the core of a word in some languages to which other things are added to form a stem or base which may in turn have affixes of various kinds. In Hamito-Semitic languages, and most clearly in Semitic, most words contain a root which typically consists of three consonants and has a general lexical meaning, and a pattern which consists of certain vowel arrangements often in connection with certain affixes and has a grammatical meaning.

Compare the following Arabic words containing roots drs and frq:

dars	'lesson'	farq	'difference'
darras	'he taught'	farraq	'he separated'
tadrīs	'teaching'	tafrīq	'seperation'

In Indo-European the root consists typically of a syllable containing a consonant, a vowel, and a consonant, which shows vowel variations and often takes affixes to become a stem. For example, Latin roots cap and vid:

capere	'to take'	vidēre	'to see'
cēpī	'I took'	vīdī	'I saw'
incipiō	'I begin'	invideo	'I envy'

ROSETTA STONE A famous tablet containing an inscription in (1) Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, (2) another form of Egyptian writing, and (3) in Greek. It was discovered near Rosetta, Egypt, in 1799, and is now in the British Museum. Since scholars were able to read the Greek version, this bilingual inscription became the key to the decipherment of the Egyptian language.

RUNES The name given to alphabets of which the letters are unconnected and have a certain characteristic geometric shape. It is applied principally to certain alphabets once used to write Germanic languages, but also, for example, for the letters used in the Old Turkish inscriptions of Orhon (q.v.) and elsewhere.

SEMITIC A family of languages including Akkadian, Arabic, Hebrew, etc., characterized by a number of throat consonants, a root and pattern structure (see ROOT) and a two-noun construction. It constitutes one division of the Hamito-Semitic stock (q.v.).

SUMERIAN The language spoken by the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia from the fourth or second millenium B.C. It was written in a cuneiform (q.v.) script: writing was apparently invented by the Sumerians. It has not been demonstrated that Sumerian is related to any other language.

SYLLABARY A system of writing in which each symbol tends to represent a syllable, such as ba, ku, i, mish, in the language being written, e.g. Old Persian, Korean, or Japanese syllabaries. No syllabary is in current use in the Middle East, but cf. ALPHABET.

SYRIAC The name given to various Semitic dialects of the same general type as Aramaic (q.v.), especially those spoken more toward the East. Classical Syriac, the vehicle of a large Christian literature and still the liturgical language of several Eastern Churches, was based originally on the language of Edessa in northern Mesopotamia (modern Urfa). The name is also applied to the "neo-Syriac" spoken by certain Christian communities in Iran and Iraq at the present day. Syriac was and is written in its own distinctive Syriac alphabet, which runs from right to left and is basically one of consonant signs, with the vowel points, of which there are several systems, usually omitted.

TEL EL-AMARNA LETTERS A large number of clay tablets inscribed for the most part in Akkadian, found in Tel El-Amarna, Egypt, in 1887, turned out to be the diplomatic correspondence of King Akhenaten and King Amenophis III of Egypt (about 1370-1348 B.C.). The letters included two in Hittite, one in Hurrian, and many glosses in the West Semitic then spoken in Palestine and Syria, and thus were of great value from a linguistic point of view as well as for the light they cast on the customs of the time.

TRANSCRIPTION The written representation of a language by symbols or spellings other than those of the standard orthography of the language. If the language is normally unwritten, any writing system devised is called a transcription unless it becomes the accepted orthography. If a transcription is based exclusively on the sounds of the language, it is called a phonetic transcription. One important variety of phonetic transcription is the phonemic transcription in which each symbol consistently represents one phoneme (q.v.) of the language being written. Transcriptions which are only partially phonetic (or phonemic) are also used for various reasons; they are usually based in part on grammatical or semantic considerations. Cf. TRANSLITERATION.

TRANSLITERATION The systematic use of the symbols of one writing system to represent those of another, the ideal being a one-to-one correspondence so that something written by means of the transliteration can be converted to the original orthography and vice versa without ambiguity. The term is most often used to refer to systems of using the Roman alphabet to represent various oriental alphabets. Two well-known systems of transliteration for Arabic and Persian, for example, are that of the Encyclopedia of Islam and that of the Board of Geographic Names of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Cf. TRANSCRIPTION.

TURKIC A family of languages spoken in a broad zone extending from Turkey across Central Asia to Mongolia, and in other areas of Europe and Asia. They are characterized by vowel harmony, a predominance of suffixation, and a distinctive syntax. The Turkic languages seem to constitute one division of the Altaic stock, which is assumed to include also Mongolian and Tunguz. The most important Turkic languages spoken in the Middle East are Turkish proper and Azeri (qq.v.).

TURKISH The Turkic language spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of the Turkish Republic and the official language of the country. The total number of speakers must be about 22,000,000. It has been written in the Roman alphabet since 1929, before which the Arabic alphabet was used.

UGARITIC The Semitic language spoken in northern coastal Syria in the second millenium B.C. It was unknown to modern scholarship until the excavation of Ras Shamra (q.v.). It was written in a cuneiform script similar in its system, though not in the form of the letters, to the Phoenician alphabet.

VOWEL POINTS The diacritic marks used in various alphabets, notably the Arabic, Hebrew, and Syriac, to represent vowels. In all three of these alphabets the vowel marks are added only for special purposes and are ordinarily omitted. The only other method of indicating vowels in these alphabets is the use of certain consonant letters, especially those for y and w, to represent vowels as well.